

VZCZCXYZ0001
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDM #0706 2830357
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 090357Z OCT 08
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5428
INFO RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY 7412
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 5635
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY 5003
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 0361
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 000706

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO AND NEA/ELA
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MCDERMOTT
PARIS FOR WALLER
LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/08/2018

TAGS: MOPS PGOV LE SY

SUBJECT: REPORTS OF SARG ARMOR DEPLOYMENT UNSUBSTANTIATED

REF: A. IIR 6 891 0163 08
1B. SEPTEMBER 23 & 24 EMBASSY DAMASCUS-NEA/ELA EMAIL
1C. OCTOBER 7 EMBASSY DAMASCUS-NEA/ELA EMAIL
1D. DAMASCUS 703
1E. BEIRUT 1449

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.5 b and d.

11. (S/NF) Summary: Despite two separate visits to the northern Syrian/Lebanese border in recent days, Post has been unable to verify diplomatic and media reports suggesting the SARG has positioned tanks along its side of the border. DATT personnel have documented the deployment of Syrian troops along the border, as the SARG itself has admitted, but Post can not verify reports that the SARG has either increased the number of troops beyond the 1,000 we reported, or augmented troop deployments with tanks or other heavily armored vehicles. End summary.

12. (S/NF) Embassy Damascus DATT personnel noticed increased SARG security service activity along the northern Syrian/Lebanese border in mid-September. This observation was followed by regional media reports suggesting that nearly 10,000 troops were being deployed along this border in an effort to stem cross-border fuel smuggling. In a follow-up tour on September 22, DATT confirmed Syrian military activity in the border area, estimating that perhaps 1,000 troops had been deployed. He also observed tents and other comfort items, such as satellite dishes and televisions, which suggested that the border deployment was expected to continue for an extended period (ref A). Given the relatively small size of the deployment, we assessed that the repositioning did not portend a significant offensive military operation and could, in fact, have been undertaken for the stated purpose of countering cross-border smuggling. (ref B).

13. (S/NF) On or about October 5 media and diplomatic reporting suggested that the SARG was moving tanks and other armored vehicles from the Homs area to the northern Syrian/Lebanese border. DAO Ops NCO traveled to Homs and Tartus, on October 6, in an effort to verify these reports. Along that road, he probed into the secondary roads leading toward the Lebanese border. He found no tanks (although he cannot rule out they could have been under cover or beyond his range of vision) nor did he find any evidence of increased security activity. Additionally, he did not observe any unusual military support vehicle activities in that sector. He did not go to the area where DATT personal observed Syrian troop in late September (ref A).

PolOff, accompanied by a Canadian diplomat, traveled to the area between Al Qusayr and the border on October 7, exploring the area just south of where the DAO Ops NCO had traveled. PolOff also investigated the secondary roads leading to the border and similarly found no tanks or other heavily armored vehicles, nor evidence that such equipment moved through these narrow and lightly tarred roads. Along the highway and at the border checkpoints there were no signs of unusual activity or a heightened security posture. On one secondary road, PolOff was stopped by a plainclothes security officer. The officer appeared relaxed and small talk was exchanged. The security officer did not appear particularly concerned by the presence of Western diplomats traveling in a diplomatic-plated vehicle along Syrian backroads two kilometers from the Lebanese border. The SARG security officer did record the plate number of the diplomatic vehicle before it departed, which we would describe as standard operating procedure.

¶4. (S/NF) Comment: While we can not rule out a possible increase in Syria's military deployment along the border, Post personnel have been unable to visually verify tanks or an unusual/heighened security posture during two trips to the area this week. Equally puzzled by media reports out of Lebanon, our diplomatic contacts tell us they also have seen no evidence that would substantiate these reports.

CONNELLY